



Weaning: toward the ideal

When it's time to wean calves, the best you can hope for is to follow a plan. You do have a plan, don't you? If not, things can get ugly. Cows, calves and your bottom line will suffer needlessly.

Weaning sets the stage for a calf's feedlot performance and eventual meat quality. Major errors at this time compromise genetic potential and, in the big picture, consumer demand.

Think of it as a logistics challenge: carefree calves making their living from milk, grass and water must transition to no milk and usually no grass. When you wean, make sure to give them lots of fresh water where they can't miss it.

There are low-stress weaning options that allow continued animal contact, grazing and pasture watering, but they don't fit all plans and resources.

Maybe your newly weaned calves can graze for a while, but they can't stay out there for long. In most cases, they simply won't get enough or the right kind of nutrition. You may lose in the long run if you secure their short-term health without stepping up to a grain-based ration.

Every calf and its owner would benefit from a vaccination program prior to weaning. Get to know a local veterinarian and discuss your goals and resources. There are exact product guidelines and timing of shots that qualify for branded production systems. These often add \$15 to \$20 per head to the sale price. There are also a lot of workable options that fall short of ideal but provide fairly effective protection for calves. Work toward the ideal.

Before settling on a preweaning program, you should know where your calves will go at weaning. If they will go straight to market, be sure to send along details of their health program and genetics. You probably won't get full value for your efforts, because bawling calves don't sell themselves well. But a health report may provide some reassurance to bidders that the calves can overcome the stress.

Giving vaccinations to prevent disease is the cornerstone of most "natural" beef health programs, because any calves that require antibiotics later become ineligible. Be sure the information on your calves includes birth date ranges and whether they have had growth implants.

If weaning day finds you with no plan, and calves have no health history, the auction market may be your only option. That's not to say auctions are full of such calves, but they have to accept the broad range of genetics and management out there.

The price may be disappointing, but talk it over with the auction manager and you may learn how to better prepare your calves next time. That could grow into a business relationship where you plan ahead and sell calves at a breed-specific, preconditioned special calf sale for top dollar.

Well-planned weaning also opens doors to other marketing options, such as retained ownership or partnering with a feedlot. It is often said that the more you invest in the best genetics and management, the more it pays to maintain ownership. We could add, the more you know about them, the less risk. If you are selling, the right records can make \$50/head difference.

When you plan to own calves long term, through the feeding phase, it often pays to give them an early start. Recent studies indicate the common practice of weaning at seven months may be the worst possible time for calves, in the window between maternal antibody protection and their own immune system development.

That's why some ranchers who calve in June wean by late September, but you can bet they don't ship the calves to market. After preconditioning and booster vaccinations, most of

those calves will stay on a grain-based ration in retained- or shared-ownership programs through finishing.

There are a lot of ideas on weaning management, and not all of them will work on all farms. Take the ones that appeal to your situation and customize them somewhat to fit. But keep in mind that the key to greater success may be to customize your way of thinking to better fit today's beef industry.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll compare your herd to a football team. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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